DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 519 CG 028 806

AUTHOR Norum, Karen E.
TITLE Enlighten Me, Don't Lose Me: Homeless Youth and the Education System.
PUB DATE 1996-10-00
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NASCEHCY) Annual Conference (Nashville, TN, October 23-26, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; At Risk Persons; Children; Dropouts; Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Homeless People; *Poverty; *Public Schools; Runaways; School Attendance Legislation; *School Counseling; School Policy; *Transient Children; Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

America is called the "Land of Opportunity." Popular stories help to develop and perpetuate a mental model that says anyone can make anything of themselves. Education is promoted as the great equalizer; it is believed that anyone can go to high school in the United States, and even to college if they try hard enough. This mental model is challenged through exploring the plight of homeless youth. Descriptive data on homeless children and youth in the nation and in the Denver area are presented. The program provided by Urban Peak, a day shelter that cares for at-risk, homeless, and runaway youth is described. Long-term costs to society of youth who "drop out" rather than negotiate the complex maze that constitutes access to social and educational programs are discussed. Although the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act intends that homeless children have access to school, the reality is quite different; barriers presented by the educational system are discussed. Survey research conducted with homeless youth in the Denver metropolitan area in 1995 and 1996 is presented. Changes in school policies are needed to meet the needs of homeless youth who are struggling to finish school, get jobs, and make something of themselves. Sample survey of homeless youth is appended. Contains 18 references. (Author/EMK)

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ED 424 519

Enlighten Me, Don't Lose Me: Homeless Youth and the Education System

Running Head: Enlighten Me

Karen E. Norum, Ph.D.
University of South Dakota
School of Education
Division of Technology for Training and Development
Vermillion, SD 57069
605/677-5489 (phone)
605/677-5438 (fax)
knorum@usd.edu

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Abstract

America is called the "Land of Opportunity." This helps develop and perpetuate a mental model (Senge, 1990) that says anyone can make anything of themselves. This article seeks to challenge this mental model through exploring the plight of homeless youth in the United States. Research conducted with homeless youth in the Denver metro area in 1995 and 1996 is presented.

In the U.S., we grow up hearing that America is the "Land of Opportunity." Anyone can make anything of themselves. Why, many people immigrate here for that very reason. And this idea is perpetuated through the telling of popular stories; examples of people who have gone from rags to riches. For example, Abraham Lincoln was born in a small log cabin, yet he became President of the United States. Marilyn Monroe was "discovered" and her legacy lives on today. And a recent example of triumph over tragedy is Rudy Galindo, the 1996 U.S. Men's National Figure Skating Champion, the Hispanic, openly gay 26-year old who grew up in a trailer park. Yes, in America, the Great Democracy, one can aspire to be anything!

Ingrained with such thinking, we develop a mental model (Senge, 1990) that says anyone that works hard enough and wants it badly enough will do well for themselves. People who are poor, on welfare, living in poverty, and/or homeless simply are not trying hard enough or they aren't sufficiently motivated to change their situation. For if they were, they could rise above it all and turn their lives around.

Kozol and Barber present challenges to this mental model. Kozol (1995) challenges the idea of using "miracle stories" as inspiration, stories about those who have managed to rise above it all and turn their lives around, usually with the help of a special person who took interest in their plight:

> The trouble with miracles, however, is that they don't happen for most children and a good society cannot be built on miracles or on the likelihood that they will keep occurring. There is also a degree of danger that, in emphasizing these unusual relationships and holding up for praise the very special children that can take advantage of them, without making clear how rare these situations are, we may seem to be condemning those who don't have opportunities like these or, if they do, cannot respond to them. (p. 160)

Barber (1992) asks whose story is it anyway? When we tell the American story, whose story is it? Do the stories about the Land of Opportunity really belong to every American? Can the stories belong to every American when in 1991, every 35 seconds a baby was born into poverty; every night 100,000 children went to sleep homeless; almost twice daily, a kid under five was murdered; every year, nearly half a million drop out of school; every day 135,000 kids showed up at school with guns instead of books? (Barber, 1992, p. 194).

The Great Equalizer

Education is promoted as the great equalizer (Barber, 1992). Anyone can go to school in America. After all, we have a *public* education system. Anyone can get at least a high school education. As far as beyond high school, it may take a bit more motivation, but with financial aid packages and federally subsidized student loans, again, anyone who really wanted to could pursue their education beyond

high school. And we all know that the higher the level of education, the better the employment opportunities (Bauman, 1996). We also know that people with decent educations don't end up on the welfare rolls or in homeless shelters. That is, unless some highly unusual circumstances transpire in their lives. And even if that happens, their stay on the welfare rolls or in the homeless shelter will be temporary. That is what our mental model tells us anyway.

Again, Kozol (1995) challenges this mental model through the words of one of the characters in his book:

> If you weave enough bad things into the fibers of a person's life—sickness and filth, old mattresses and other junk thrown in the streets and other ugly ruined things, and ruined people, a prison here, sewage there, drug dealers here, the homeless people over there, and then give us the very worst schools anyone could think of, hospitals that keep you waiting for ten hours, police that don't show up when someone's dying, take the train that's underneath the street in the good neighborhoods and put it up above where it shuts out the sun, you can guess that life will not be very nice and children will not have much sense of being glad of who they are. Sometimes, it feels like we've been buried six feet under their perceptions. (pp. 39, 40)

These words imply that our society has created a social system that helps poor people stay poor. Even for those that are highly motivated, the social program bureaucracies make it difficult to rise above it all (Kozol 1988, 1995). Those that do manage to turn their lives around may be exceptions rather than the rule (Kozol, 1995).

The bureaucracy that in many cases serves to perpetuate poverty and homelessness can also be found in the education system. The

mental model we hold concerning public education being available to everyone is challenged when we consider the plight of homeless youth.

Why Would a 15-Year-Old be Homeless?

In 1993, there were at least 4,356 homeless children and youth between the ages of 5 and 21 in Colorado. 2,170 (50%) were elementary school-aged children; 894 (20%) were junior high school-aged; and 1,292 (30%) were high school-aged (Avery-Spriggs, 1993). James estimated that in spring 1991, 390 youth on their own in the Denver metro area were homeless (meaning they lacked a permanent and safe place to live). 125 of these were living in crash pads and apartments in Denver's Capitol Hill neighborhood (James, 1991). While service systems exist to care for homeless adults and elementary school-aged children (generally, homeless elementary school-aged children are identified through their families), there is no coordinated service system that identifies and cares for homeless youth—at least not in Colorado.

Located in Capitol Hill, Urban Peak is a day shelter that caters to at-risk youth and serves over 1,300 runaway and homeless youth each year. The Peak provides immediate needs for this group such as food, clothing, HIV testing and counseling, legal assistance, getting an ID,

assistance in getting back into school, and counseling. According to a counselor at Urban Peak, most of the kids are homeless because they either chose to leave a bad home situation, ran away, or were kicked out of their home. In many cases, relationships with parents have been severed, either by the parent or by the child, and homeless youth are very likely to report abuse or neglect by parents (Franklin & Miller, 1992); in fact, 85% of Urban Peak's clients have experienced abuse or neglect. Many have also been kicked out of public schools for truancy and/or fighting.

Relatively few of these youth are literally homeless (sleeping on the streets, in abandoned buildings, or in emergency shelters for the homeless or battered women); most stay with a friend, in a youth shelter, or a group home (Franklin & Miller, 1992). According to James, as of December 1992, homeless youth on their own comprised almost one in six of the overall homeless population in the Denver metro area (James, 1992).

If a homeless youth wants help through social and/or educational programs, he/she is faced with a complicated maze to negotiate. Rather than negotiate this complicated maze, the homeless youth is more likely to "drop out" of society altogether (Youth on the Edge, 1994). The cost to society is high: while there is very little direct cost to society while that youth is living on the streets, long-term costs are high. The odds of a homeless youth successfully completing their education are low, which in turn makes that youth less employable, in

turn creating a dependency on the welfare system, contributing to the creation of another generation of the homeless. In fact, evidence suggests that homelessness among families and homelessness among youth on their own are often different stages of the same problem (James, 1992; James & Miller, 1992). Many homeless youth are parents of young children already. Single parent, female-headed families predominate among homeless families. In fact, families with children compose more than one-third of the homeless population (Children's Defense Fund, 1992), making it the fastest growing sub population of homeless. 75% of these families are headed by single parents, primarily women. Often, these single parent, female-headed families are the result of a young woman becoming pregnant and having the child while she herself is homeless (James, 1992). Additional evidence suggests that today's homeless youth will be tomorrow's homeless adults unless an intervention is made: those with a history of abuse and neglect often have difficulty establishing a stable living arrangement as an adult (James, 1992). Mental disorders, emotional problems, and substance abuse are also severe problems among homeless youth (James, 1992; James & Miller, 1992; Youth on the Edge, 1994).

The public school may be the primary place for a homeless youth to seek help. However, there are many problems associated with expecting public schools to fill in the gap that exists in service systems.

The McKinney Act

In 1987, Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act to aid homeless persons. The act was amended in November of 1990. A portion of this act relates specifically to the education of homeless children and youth. The Colorado Act (Senate Bill 90-44) states that "no child shall be denied the benefits of a free education in the public schools because the child is homeless." This means that children and youth who become homeless can choose to continue school in the school they were attending before they became homeless, or they may attend school in the attendance area in which they are actually living. They are entitled to transportation to get to school; tutoring or help to catch up if learning time has been lost; and to take part in school programs and receive school services offered to other children. Homeless children and youth are not to be kept out of school or experience enrollment delays due to the transfer of records, immunization or residency requirements, or guardianship issues. In fact, according to the Colorado Department of Education, state and local education agencies must change policies which keep homeless children and youth from attending school. The purpose of this law is to remove barriers, legal and practical, to facilitate the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school.

The criticism is that schools are failing homeless youth on their own (James, 1992; James & Miller, 1992). The typical homeless youth is

17 years old and has a ninth grade education (James & Miller, 1992). James (1992) and James and Miller (1992) found that most Colorado school districts make a practice of refusing to enroll homeless youth on their own who have not been legally emancipated by their parents. Policies, requirements and procedures serve to act as barriers, limiting access to educational programs and opportunities (Howard, 1994; Youth on the Edge, 1994). In Colorado, it has been reported that even if a homeless youth successfully breaks through the barriers and does manage to enroll in school, when it is discovered that he/she is homeless and on their own, he/she is frequently expelled (James, 1992; James & Miller, 1992) . Because absences require an excuse from the parents and these excuses cannot be produced, the homeless youth is denied the benefits of a free education in the public schools.

When we are not aware of the daily issues that preoccupy those who are homeless, we may mistakenly conclude that education just is not important to this population. On the contrary,

> Many youths want to succeed academically and move beyond their current crises; they want to finish school, go to college and obtain employment. While these youths bring a sense of resiliency and desire to the classroom, their lack of permanent and safe shelter often creates impediments to learning that are insurmountable (Youth on the Edge, 1994, p. 23).

This statement was confirmed by a survey conducted with homeless youth (Appendix 1). I conducted a survey in 1995 and 1996 with residents at Urban Peak. In total, there were 21 respondents, ranging in age from 14 to 19 years old. About half of the respondents were male

and half female. Although it was a small number of respondents, those that work with this population thought the responses were typical for this population in general.

The majority of these respondents said that they did intend to finish their high school education, either by returning to school or obtaining a GED. Slightly more than half said that they were interested in pursuing education or training beyond high school. Most saw education as important; something that would help create more opportunities for their future and allow them to get better jobs. A barrier to finishing their education is the public school system itself.

Making Schools Welcoming Places

The respondents to this survey identified several reasons they are reluctant to pursue enrolling in a public school. One mentioned the presence of guns in schools as a deterrent to enrolling; a couple of respondents mentioned the presence of drugs as a deterrent. One respondent said that school was boring—it wasn't challenging for him. Another thought the mandatory attendance requirement was difficult to meet for someone who is homeless while another respondent thought the attendance requirement should be stricter for those under 18. Several mentioned that the way they were treated in school, by peers *and* school staff, was degrading. Many believe they are just as

capable of learning as anyone else (even though some confessed to having a learning disability), yet were assigned to remedial classes and not treated with respect by teachers.

Respondents were asked to describe the "ideal" school for them and had several suggestions for improving schools. Activities, such as field trips and athletics were mentioned more than once. Class topics they would like to see include health, foreign language, art classes, the concept of "responsibility", cooking, law, poetry, reading, math, science, and self esteem. Some wanted the opportunity to expand their knowledge in a specific area, to see if it was something they would choose for a career. Others wanted remedial classes extended rather than cut back. One mentioned teacher to student ratios need to be lowered.

Flexibility in the school's structure is a big need for this population. A counselor at Urban Peak thought the ideal school would have revolving days and times for class, for example, M-W-F classes from 1-3 or 5-7 pm. A youth echoed this: hold classes in blocks such as 9 to noon, 2-5 pm, and 7-9 pm, four days a week and group students according to ability rather than age. Another homeless youth wanted independent studies. Another wanted more one-on-one instruction and to be able to choose their own hours and classes. Another wanted to be able to get help for personal problems as well as the academics.

On-site services such as reduced rate child care, showers, meals/snacks, transportation, and peer counselors were suggested.

With on-site child care, a teenage parent could visit their child in between classes. Showers and having the appropriate toiletries available are a simple hygiene need, yet harder to arrange than you may think for a homeless youth. Decent meals and food in general can be a problem – homeless youth do not tend to eat on a regular schedule so snacks throughout the day would make it easier to concentrate on class while in school. Of course, transportation is a challenge, especially if the youth would like to participate in after school activities such as sports, drama, band, etc. Peer counselors who perhaps have been homeless themselves, have experienced similar home situations, or who understand the needs of this population would provide someone to at least talk to.

Indeed, alternative schools that offer smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, and flexible deadlines for program completion are much better suited to educate this population than the traditional public school environment (Youth on the Edge, 1994). Charter schools also hold some promise for this particular population. However, such alternative programs are currently available on only a small scale and many times have the same bureaucratic policies that make it difficult, if not impossible, for a homeless youth to access.

These respondents defined a "welcoming" school environment as one where everyone could feel comfortable, regardless of their home status, gender, sexual orientation, race, or age; one where everyone was treated fairly and with respect; one where the school staff took time out

of their day to talk to a student as a person; one where it was assumed that every student was capable of learning; one where awareness has been raised around the issues of homelessness and there is an understanding of how people become homeless so that the shame of being homeless is not perpetuated. Part of becoming "welcoming" places would involve changing current policies that require prior school and health records and parental consent as part of the enrollment process.

What if We Actually Acted on These Suggestions?

In the process of revising policies and procedures so that barriers are broken down instead of created, public education would become more accessible to *everyone* and schools would be more welcoming places in general. Two respondents in this survey stated that more time should be taken to put more money into curriculum and activities instead of building more schools. If these comments were taken seriously, not only would the homeless youth benefit, customers of the public education system in general would reap the benefits!

Those who work in the system sometimes forget that for the general public, schools are intimidating places. Many people would appreciate an invitation to get involved in the education system. For the homeless population, there is an even higher discomfort level

when it comes to dealing with schools. Many times, a homeless parent or youth is not comfortable with the whole idea of having to go through the enrollment process and if a school is not actively trying to whittle away barriers, the discomfort becomes an excuse to not enroll in school.

Again, while the short term costs are low, there is a price to be paid in the long run. According to the SCANS Report (US Department of Labor, 1991),

> More than half of our young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a good job. Unless all of us work to turn this situation around, these young people, and those who employ them, will pay a very high price. Low skills lead to low wages and low profits. Many of these youth will never be able to earn a decent living. And, in the long run, this will damage severely the quality of life everyone hopes to enjoy. None of us, and none of you, want to stand by while this happens. (p. v)

If this statement is true for "average" young people, how much more true for homeless youth!

Schools can become welcoming places for homeless youth by identifying the providers for the homeless in their district and building relationships with shelter personnel. Many shelters will gladly provide awareness training to school staff. A simple thing like having school staff trained in issues related to homelessness may make the difference between a high school graduate and a high school drop out.

Why Don't We Act?

Perhaps the challenge to all of us is to understand that homeless students (and homeless parents for that matter) literally live from day to day. It is difficult to focus on long-term goals when you are not sure where your next meal, bed, or shower is going to come from. Little things most of us tend to take for granted, such as clean and decent clothing, a hot meal, a bed to sleep in nightly, are major life issues for the homeless. These are issues that have to be resolved *along with* finding a job or going to school!

Unfortunately, social policy in the nation is not conducive to understanding, much less acting upon, the plight of homeless youth. Kozol (1995) suggests that the nation has regressed in terms of social policy since the days of Martin Luther King's dream and has come to accept that there is such a thing as a "good" or acceptable place for the poor:

> I guess I do not believe there are good ghettos .... So long as the most vulnerable people in our population are consigned to places that the rest of us will always shun and flee and view with fear .... So long as there are ghetto neighborhoods and ghetto hospitals and ghetto schools, I am convinced there will be ghetto desperation, ghetto violence, and ghetto fear because a ghetto is itself an evil and unnatural construction. (p. 162)

Both Kozol (1988, 1995) and Barber (1992) seem to imply that allowing some level of "acceptable" poverty is one of prices paid for having a democracy based on a free market.

"America, the Land of Opportunity" does not fit very well with "America, a nation that curses its poor" (Kozol, 1995). The amalgamation of beliefs, values, superstitions, myths, illusions, and assumptions that we hold about "America" is our core thinking (Fitzgerald, 1993) about democracy. This core thinking becomes mental models and limits us to familiar ways of thinking and feeling. Our mental models also determine how we take action (Senge, 1990). Our reality is what we use to determine what we are willing to take action on. Schwartz (1991) states that "Each of us responds, not to the world, but to our image of the world" (p. 53). Thus, if my image of the world is based on stories about the Land of Opportunity and middle-class American values were instilled in me, if I expose my core thinking, I risk creating dissonance with my "reality."

According to Wheatley (1994), complexity is the result of a great many independent agents interacting with each other in a great many ways. That is exactly what we have here. For many of us, to admit that poverty is real, homelessness is real, and social policy perpetuates rather than helps the situation, we would also have to admit that maybe trying hard enough and wanting it badly enough isn't enough for people in such circumstances to rise above it all. "Low aspirations, high dropout rates, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, female-headed households, joblessness, welfare dependency, and homelessness seem to be the fate of children born in ghetto communities" (Quint, 1994, pp. 7-8). To admit that perhaps America is the Land of Opportunity *only*

for some shatters a dearly held mental model. After all, Abraham Lincoln became president of the country. Marilyn Monroe has a star on Hollywood Boulevard. Rudy Galindo will go down in history as the first Hispanic, openly gay male to hold a national title and a world class medal in his sport. Giving up that dearly held mental model might mean considering that these people were the exception rather than the rule. It also creates work: if we really believed that social and educational policy perpetuates homelessness and poverty in this nation, and we wanted to change that, a complex systemic change would be in order. Kozol (1995) mentions that when he began the research for his book, his editor was looking for a list of potential answers and solutions. Kozol discovered that the problems are so complex, he wouldn't dare to suggest a simple list of potential solutions!

The Age of Enlightenment?

Barber (1993) argues that the future of democracy lies in education: education of the public into what it means to belong to a public, democratic nation. "...democracy means raising the common denominator, transforming the individual through education into a deliberative citizen" (Barber, 1993, p. 265). It means educating everyone, including homeless youth. Indeed, as the individual

benefits from an education, the welfare of society is promoted (Bauman, 1996). If we agreed with Barber and Bauman, we would change our social and educational systems so that everyone, including homeless youth, has the opportunity for a public education. Not only would they have the opportunity for a public education, they would receive an invitation to education.

Imagine for a moment that you are a 15 (almost 16) year old young woman who has been the target of an abusive stepfather for the last three years; your mother refuses to believe your stories of abuse. You decide the living situation is intolerable and leave home. You are a good student and have a dream of attending medical school to become a surgeon. However, once you leave home, you find it takes most of your energy and effort to find food and shelter on a daily basis. Your attendance at school becomes sporadic at best. After a few weeks of misery, an 18 year old male (also homeless) befriends you and in your desperate, lonely, frightened state, you readily welcome that friendship. That friendship is eventually betrayed when he abuses you as well. You somehow find the strength to get out of the abusive relationship and attempt to get back into school. After somehow making it through all the red tape with some assistance from a day shelter counselor, you try to attend classes regularly. But now that you've turned 16, you also try to find a job and often sacrifice going to class in favor of conducting a job search. After a few weeks, it is discovered that you have missed several days of school. Unable to

produce an acceptable excuse, you are expelled. On this day, you also find yourself two months pregnant with no income, no insurance, and not even a high school education in sight, much less medical school!

What do you think? Will this be one of those inspirational "happy miracle stories" where you rise above it all through the help of some social program and individual mentor who takes an interest in you personally? Will you be one of those "single-mother, I went back to school, it's tough but I'm putting my life together, and I still intend to become a surgeon one day" stories? Or will there be a more common and realistic ending? Will you become a homeless single-parent, female-headed family, caught up in a bureaucratic social program "style of assistance that, while alleviating some distress, accepts humiliation as the price of relief" (Kozol, 1988)? Will you lose hold of your dream and instead create another generation of the homeless? Will you beat the odds or will the odds beat you?

Is America, the Great Democracy, a land of opportunity for all or only for some? Do current social and educational policies help to create and perpetuate an underclass of the homeless? In his song "Both Sides of the Story," Phil Collins (1993) hints at the complexity of the issue:

Neighborhood peace is shattered;
it's the middle of the night.
Young faces hide in the shadows
while they watch their mother and father fight.
He says she's been unfaithful;

she says her love for him is gone.
And the brother shrugs to his sister and says
"It's like it's just us from now on."
We always need to hear both sides of the story.
We need to hear both sides of the story.

And the lights are all on, the world is watching now.
People looking for truth, we must not fail them now.
Be sure before we close our eyes
and walk away from here
to hear both sides.

A respondent to the survey described earlier summed it all up beautifully in these simple words: "Enlighten me, don't lose me!" Can Americans bring themselves to examine the mental models that are attached to the phrase "Land of Opportunity"? For those who are poor or homeless, is America a Land of Opportunity or Curses? Can we bring ourselves to hear both sides of the story and heed the poignant cry of a homeless youth?

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Urban Peak in Denver, CO for allowing the survey to be conducted; Karen Connell (Colorado Department of Education) and Margie Milenkiewicz (Samaritan House, Denver, CO) for their supportive role in this research; and Dr. Paul Bauman and Dr. Maurice Holt (University of Colorado at Denver) for their review of this manuscript. Survey results were shared at the 1996 National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Annual Conference in Nashville, TN. The presentation was entitled, "Voices of Homeless Youth: Brilliantly Poignant Views on Education."

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Appendix 1: Survey

Age: _____ ❑ Male ❑ Female

Describe the ideal school or education program for you. What kinds of courses/programs would be offered? What hours would it operate? What kinds of activities would be offered? What kinds of unique assistance/services would be offered? What kinds of issue would be taken into consideration for it to be a more "welcoming" place?

Do you intend to finish your education or get at least a GED? Why or why not?

Are you interested in pursuing education/training after high school? Why or why not?

Is there anything else you would like school personnel (teachers, counselors, principals) to be aware of?